
Iran

Voters want change, within continuity

by Muriel Mirak Weissbach

On May 23, when the Iranian population was called to the polls to elect a new President, the turnout exceeded all expectations. Of 33 million eligible voters, 29 million flocked to the polls, making it necessary for election officials to postpone closing them, twice. Instead of ending at 6 p.m., the voting booths stayed open until 10 p.m. The overwhelming majority of these voters cast their ballot for Dr. Seyed Mohammed Khatami, who garnered over 20 million votes, or 69%.

In a period characterized by low voter turnout in most European nations and the United States, the mere statistics of the Iranian vote are striking. They indicate clearly that the Iranian citizenry places trust in its political system, and sees the electoral process as a viable means through which to express its views. In pre-election polls, 92.2% of those asked said they viewed going to the polls as a national duty, and 89% considered it a religious obligation. Furthermore, that they elected Khatami, by an overwhelming margin, signals the electorate's desire for development, and change, but within the parameters of policy continuity.

Four candidates qualified to run in the election. The contest shaped up early on, between the two leading candidates, Khatami and Ali Akbar Nateq Nouri, speaker of the Majlis (parliament). In addition, were Hojjatoleslam Mohammad Mohahhadi-Reysshahri and, Seyed Reza Savarei, a lawyer, former parliamentarian, deputy head of the Judiciary, and head of the Real Estate and Document Registration Organization. Reysshahri, a member of the State Expediency Council and Leader's Representative in Hajj affairs, ran as the Presidential candidate of the Association for the Defense of the Values of the Islamic Revolution, a group he founded in 1995. He held posts as information minister in 1986 and Prosecutor General from 1989 to 1993.

Nouri and Khatami, both 54 years of age, share experience in the anti-Shah movement and in the 1979 revolution. Nouri, after completing advanced theological courses in the holy city of Qom in 1960, entered the School of Theology of Teheran University for a Bachelor of the Arts degree in philosophy in 1965. He was active politically in the Islamic movement of Imam Khomeini from 1962 to 1964, and was arrested, imprisoned, and banned under the Shah several times. After the 1979 revolution, he was appointed by Khomeini as head of the Construction Jihad Organization. He served as interior

minister during 1982-86, and otherwise was a representative of a Teheran constituency in Parliament, serving as speaker in the Fourth and Fifth Majlis. Nouri ran as the candidate of the Qom Seminary Instructors' Society and the political group Jama'a-ye Ruhaniat Mobarez (the Assembly for Combatant, Mujahid, clergy) which is the axis of the right-wing conservatives. He was cited in the Western press often for his support of conservative dress for women, and his rejection of relations with the United States.

Khatami's record

Dr. Seyed Mohammad Khatami, on the other hand, emerged in the campaign as the more liberal figure, though not in the Western sense of the term. Although he also has a background in theological and philosophical studies, in Qom and Isfahan, and he took a degree in education in 1971 from Teheran University. He was the director of the Islamic Center in Hamburg in 1978, then was elected to Parliament in 1980, and was a representative of Ayatollah Khomeini and the Kayhan newspaper group.

During his tenure as Minister of Culture and Islamic Leadership, Khatami gained popularity for his efforts to revive cultural activities in the country, particularly filmmaking, and to introduce modern technologies into the media. He became the Cultural Adviser of the Command Center of the Armed Forces in 1988, and in 1992, Presidential Adviser and Director of the National Library. In 1996, he became a member of the high council of the cultural revolution, by decree of Ayatollah Khamenei.

Khatami's "liberal" profile became distinct during the campaign, when he spoke out boldly in favor of freedom of speech, of the press, and of assembly. Election material described his support for the founding of civilian associations, the respect for different tendencies and perspectives, and the strengthening of a culture of criticism. During one of his many encounters with university students during the campaign, Khatami showed a keen understanding of the West, and a very balanced approach to communicating with it. According to a *Teheran Times* summary, "He explained [his views] by saying that the West is moving toward the path of humanism. By this he meant that man is the main axis upon which material life develops, but in Islam we are of the view that reason is next in importance to revelation and is capable of constructing human lives. Further, he said that our basic difference with the West is in our attitudes, but other than this all aspects of development, including social, political, economic, and cultural, have originated from the West. By expressing these views he said he intended to convey the idea that development will not be materialized without having a proper understanding of the West, i.e., knowing about its advantages and disadvantages. We cannot confront the West blindly. We should have knowledge about the issues such as liberalism, fascism, and capitalism, in order to have a basis on which to judge them, Khatami said.

He said the salvation of Iranian society lies in the possession of two kinds of situations. We should have a critic[ism] for the West and modernization and another for tradition. We should recognize all the positive and negative aspects of the two basic issues posed by Westernization and tradition [because] without having enough understanding of both we can neither reject nor accept either.”

‘We must understand Western culture’

Khatami’s emphasis on the need to accept what is good in Western culture is explicit: He “said that such understanding of their real nature is a must and only then should we deal with ourselves and search ourselves from the depths of our being. Therefore, an understanding of the West, tradition, and ourselves will help save this society. If we can do this, we can have the power to construct the country, Khatami said.” Among the positive contributions of the West, is technology, including the most modern means of communications technology. His slogans included: “Above all else, we have to believe in our youth” and “We cannot inoculate ourselves against technological breakthroughs like satellites and the Internet.” At the same time, he stressed the need for Iran to maintain its cultural identity, in order to be able to resist attacks from abroad. Another indication of his openness to other cultures is his mastery of three foreign languages, English, Arabic, and German.

If, with Khatami’s Presidency, a greater openness to the West can be expected, this does not mean a shift in fundamental policy. In his first press conference as President-elect, he said that Iran would not give up its independence, which he said had been the main objective, and result, of the 1979 revolution. “Any change in our relations with the U.S. depends on change in attitude of the U.S.,” he said. In other words, were the U.S. administration to pursue a policy of “constructive engagement,” offering a fair dialogue, Iran would not refuse.

Most important, Khatami will not introduce any changes in fundamental economic policy or the foreign policy orientation which is shaped by it. Khatami was very much the candidate of outgoing President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who, according to constitutional clauses, could not run for a third term. Rafsanjani gave Khatami the explicit political backing of his group, known as the Cadres or Combatants of Reconstruction, which, as the name denotes, is associated with the ambitious reconstruction effort undertaken throughout the country over the last eight years. During his campaign, and in a meeting with Rafsanjani following the announcement of the results, Khatami acknowledged that the national reconstruction program had laid the basis for building an advanced, independent, and free Iran.

If there were any doubts about the commitment on the part of Iran’s political elite to pursue its economic development policy, they should be dispelled by the fact that institutional structures have been put into place to guarantee that continu-

ity. First, as one of the minor candidates, Seyed Reza Zavarei, pointed out in remarks to the press, Article 110 of the Constitution stipulates that the general policies of Iran are determined by the Leader of the Islamic Revolution, who is Ayatollah Khamenei.

A new institution

In addition, according to reports in the Iranian press on April 10 (and ignored in the West until recently), a new institution has been created, known as the Assembly for Determining the Expediency of the Islamic System. The new institution, significantly, was founded in the presence of both Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and Rafsanjani. Chaired by Rafsanjani, it is to function as a “clearing institution” to resolve any conflict which might emerge between the Majlis and the Guardians Council, an unelected group consisting exclusively of senior clergymen. The latter body’s task is to follow up the parliament’s resolutions and intervene to determine whether this legislation accords with the principles of Islam and the Islamic revolution. The Expediency Assembly is to be regarded as the supreme decision-maker between the Majlis and Guardians, and even Khamenei would have to consult the Expediency Assembly before taking major decisions pertaining to foreign policy, economy, and defense.

Rafsanjani told the members of the new institution that it will “function as consultant to the Leader [Khamenei] on overall policies. . . . This Expediency Assembly’s function is to remove all the differences and problems between the Majlis and the Guardians, problems that cannot be solved through the constitution. And to solve problems on the national level that cannot be solved through the law.”

Continuity in economic and foreign policy, which will lead to further economic development, is clearly what the electorate voted for, in choosing the successor to Rafsanjani. As pre-election opinion polls published in the *Teheran Times* showed, the main concerns of voters were economic. When asked what measures of Rafsanjani’s they thought most important, they listed: implementation of construction projects (26.1%); implementation of industrial projects (17.1%); promoting the country’s construction (14.5%); boosting political ties with other states (5.1%); reconstruction of war-stricken areas (5%); raising the status of underprivileged areas (4.9%); economic development (3.1%); and so on. Among the issues “to be given top priority by the next President,” 31.7% listed resolving economic problems, and 10.4% listed creating job opportunities, as the top two responses.

President-elect Khatami enjoys, therefore, a mandate which is not only numerical but politically informed: He has the vast majority of the electorate, including the majority of women and youth, who have selected him to continue Iran’s development course, and its growing economic, political, and cultural ties to other nations of the world. This election represents an excellent opportunity for the United States to rethink and improve its policy toward Iran.